

Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

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My wife started Christmas shopping the last week of August. Through autumn, she did enough traffic in layaway bins to change the Retail Consumer's Index for Texas. By frost, she'd run such a volume in swapping Gold Bond stamps for Green Stamps that a rate of exchange was being quoted daily over the radio. Macy's department store in its grandest years never witnessed so much shopping. She must have walked 400 miles up and down San Angelo's sidewalks just to buy a few trinkets for our eight kids.

Buying her a present was a bigger job. The Wool Capital doesn't have but one taxidermist shop in town. Their selection of stuffed animals was limited to an owl that had come from an old saloon. In spite of knowing how bad she would have liked a stuffed owl, I wasn't about to give \$8 for secondhand bar-roosting bird. The week before, the Dallas papers had advertised one of those roadrunner birds holding a green lizard in his mouth for only \$10.95 plus postage. Like I told that high-binding San Angelo bird stuffer, any nut knows that used owls shouldn't be selling anywhere close to what new roadrunners are bringing.

It would've been different if the owl had been holding a snake or a mouse in his beak, but to just pitch off \$8 on an owl sitting on a board is too foolish for my book. As rough as everything is on the livestock market, you could take \$8 and get overloaded with a bunch of unstuffed animals. In fact, I'd hate to think how many hogs a man could buy at that price. I know it'd be enough to fill up several taxidermist shops, with some left over to turn in the streets.

The hardware stores were operating in the same dream world. They wanted over \$2 for a tin ash bucket with a tin shovel. The fellow putting on the price tags must have decided everybody who had wood stoves was a rich antique collector. He probably didn't know that ashes could be raked in a lard bucket and hauled off to the dump.

Inflation has ruined people's sense of values. I wouldn't have given \$2 for an ash bucket even if he'd thrown in a clothes brush to clean the ashes off her clothes.

A smart old boy running a drugstore finally solved my search. I got her a nice pocket flashlight that has a pretty a key chain as you'll ever see. On Christmas morning, she didn't act much like she liked the gift. I guess she was too tired to show any enthusiasm.

It'll take all this month to exchange and re-exchange the kids' Christmas gifts. By February, she'll be back home on a full time basis. Christmas is worth the time and effort it takes, but it sure is hard on a fellow who has to watch his money. Unless things get better, ranchers are going to have to join a religion that doesn't believe in exchanging high priced gifts.